

**Acting chief: Oversight ruining force**

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**Press of AC**

BRIDGETON — A lieutenant serving as this city's acting police chief walked away from his job earlier this week, making him the second top cop in as many months to retire in protest.

Lt. Dan Mourning, 43, served his last day as a police officer on Monday after a 22-year career in law enforcement. He is currently out on stress leave as he waits for pension benefits to register on the state's retirement system.

He said Wednesday that his decision to leave the department was because his job had become intolerably hampered by state oversight.

"At some point, the job no longer became fun," Mourning said. "Anybody knows you want to be able to enjoy your job. It's not fun for me, and it's not fun for a lot of the other police officers."

For the past several months, representatives from the state's Department of Community Affairs, or DCA, have been working with city officials to improve efficiency in the way the city is governed.

The oversight is part of a memorandum of understanding between the state and city, which agreed to the help in exchange for about \$2.5 million in state-issued Distressed Cities Aid.

Police Chief Jeffrey Wentz, who served as the city's top cop for three years before leaving in late March, cited the same reason for his retirement, albeit in a more vague fashion.

Wentz said he was becoming increasingly frustrated at the level of administrative bureaucracy. He and Mourning, however, aren't the only city employees to bristle at the continued presence of state representatives in City Hall.

Some murmur that they perceive the DCA employees as threats, pointing to the high number of retirements earlier this year under a special employee buyout offer.

Mayor Jim Begley, however, said the extra help has been both positive and welcome.

"We love DCA," Begley said. "The DCA gives you boundaries on what you can and can't do. They have professionals who've been governing cities for eons. All of them are highly professional people, and they come with proven ideas that work."

According to the agreement, the city must follow all recommendations made by the DCA while also providing monthly revenue and expenditure reports. It also cannot hire any new people without DCA approval, and it is barred from charitable giving or starting new programs.

The city has undertaken other measures to improve its bottom line, including the rigorous review of city expenditures such as cell-phone service costs and the raising of fees for documents such as birth certificates.

The state-imposed severity, Begley said, has been a sobering experience in exposing flaws in the city's operation.

Mourning, however, said the DCA-imposed restrictions have become counterproductive, and the state's "do more with less people" philosophy has surpassed its effectiveness.